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Overcoming A Dirty Category

- Cross-Cultural Experience in the American Classroom: -

by

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ABSTRACT

According to Edmund Leach (1976), boundaries are dirty. Yet power resides in the boundaries. As foreign-born instructors, we fall into a dirty category because we exist in cultural boundaries. This paper recognizes the American style of communication studies as a dirty category. This paper suggests that our role be redefined in the face of this dirty category, and that we should find ways to make positive contributions to the discipline of communication.

Overcoming A Dirty Category*

Cross-Cultural Experiences in the American Classroom

Every person is a fool in somebody's opinion. <Spanish Proverb>

1. A Dirty Category

According to Lord Chesterfield, "Dirt is matter out of place" (cited in Leach, 1976, p. 61). We, as cross-cultural communicators, fall into a dirty category because we are "out of place." I am out of Korea. Where are you from?

We operate in boundaries between dirt and cleanliness. We become dirty as "boundaries become dirty by definition" (Leach, ibid.). What makes the boundaries dirty? The "clean" does. Who is clean? The answer is "the other." Or is it? We operate in the interfaces between different cultures, one of which is American culture wherein we are communicating right now.

However, according to Edmund Leach, cleanness is impotent whereas dirt is potent. He also noted that power resides in dirt and in boundaries. As we operate in the interfaces, we may become powerful inter-cultural agents in American classrooms in particular and various socio-cultural scenes in general.

2. Laughing at the Dirt

When we enter into a foreign culture, we automatically install cultural boundaries, and the cultural boundary divides the world into two worlds. Standing on the boundary, we can see how humans form oppositional groups and differentiate among one another. Humans in the two worlds begin to categorize each other in terms of binary oppositions such as <We are clean : You are dirty>, <Our familiar culture : Your strange culture>, <Our normal culture : Your abnormal culture>, <Our superior culture : Your inferior culture>, and so on. Certainly, such oppositions are based on pride and prejudice, and/or on arrogance and ignorance. This is what the Spanish proverb cited at the beginning of this paper implies. Or, as Leach (1976) observed, people *X* perceive that people *Y* across the valley are barbarians simply because people *Y* are across the valley, and they do everything back to front!

Those who stand on the boundary fall into a dirty category, too. They may feel a certain power being exerted on them as cross-cultural agents. Or they may be exerting a certain power on both sides of the cultural boundary. The following example may explain this point.

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Episcopalian theologian Alan Watts told the following story:

> Frederic Spielberg, philosopher and orientalist, visited a Taoist hermit like Pu-tai on an island near Hong Kong. When he was introduced as an American university professor traveling under a Rockefeller grant to find out whether Asian spirituality was still vital, the hermit began to chuckle very gently, and this gradually developed into uproarious laughter at which his whole glutaneous mass shook like jelly. That was the end of the interview. (Watt, undated)

What you see here is a little bit of arrogance on the part of the American professor, for what was implied was something like this: "American spirituality is in good shape. How about yours?" The Taoist priest's answer was uproarious laughter, which flushed away cross-cultural communication. Some years ago, I heard something similar to this at a rhetorical communication session of the National Communication Association Convention. An American rhetorician raised a question: "Is there rhetoric in Chinese culture?" He concluded that China has no rhetorical tradition. At first, Chinese-American scholars were upset; then their uproarious laughter made the American rhetoricians embarrassed. I can imagine how Lao Tzu (604-531 B.C.), Confucius (551-478 B.C.), and Chuang Tzu (369-286 B.C.) would respond to this interchange, in their tombs: I can hear their uproarious laughter.

We foreign-born instructors came to this country to learn the American style of communication studies. When we arrived in this country, we were not empty-headed, however. From the first day, we naturally engaged in comparative studies of communication. What did we find?

3. A Dirty, Mixed Bag

What did we learn? You may have many different answers, answers different from mine. I would like to tell you something from my own experiences in American classrooms.

I learned that the American tradition of communication studies has a serious problem. To give the conclusion first, there is a virtual vacuum in the discipline of communication studies. Em Griffin (1997) observed that "there is no discipline within the discipline" (p. 28). What does he mean by "no discipline within our discipline of communication"?

Griffin (1997) pointed out that there is a lack of cohesion in understanding the nature of communication. For example, there is no coherent definition of communication. Dance and Larson (1976) identified 126 different definitions of communication. There will be more. Having noticed the difficulty in defining communication, Robert Craig (1999) commented, "To argue over definitions of communication is pointless" (p. 122). Dance (1970) suggested that we

need "a family of concepts" of communication (p. 210). The term *family* implies adopting a multidisciplinary approach to communication studies.

Similarly, Craig identified 249 theories of communication. Indeed, these may constitutue "*a family* of communication theories," but there is a problem. Craig (1999) noted, "Undergraduates come to communication classes for something practical, and we offer them theory. They come for something comprehensible, and we offer them fragments of a subject no one can comprehend—up to 249 theories and still counting" (p. 153).

Craig (1999) was in search of the possible foundation of communication studies, but ended up with "*a family* of traditions." He identified seven established traditions in the field of communication theory: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical traditions (see also Griffin, 2000, pp. 34-47). I would consider these seven as orientations rather than traditions, because they are at variance according to communication professors' tastes and the training they have received. Differently put, communication studies in its current form is still parasitic to the seven potential hosts.

After considering the 126 definitions of communication and 249 theories of communication and 7 traditions, Griffin (1997) concluded that "there is no discipline within the discipline" (p. 28). What, then, fills the vacuum of our discipline? All kinds of subjects have been borrowed from several disciplines.

Because there was no better approach than the ideas of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches, traditional communication researchers borrowed theories and methods from sociology, psychology, engineering, rhetoric, and literature. Many textbook writers included in their books some theories of sociology and psychology (often in their raw forms) as if they were communication theories, and communication professors taught them in college and university classrooms. William Stephenson (1967) raised an interesting question: "But what is really important in communication theory?" As an answer, he proposed "the study of a country's drama, art, movies, entertainment, and literature—all the popular and humanistic arts—is of first importance in every theoretical respect" (p. 198). Such an eclectic approach reflects American communication scholars' thinking habits, which prohibits them from bottom-up thinking.

Now, communication studies appears to have a multidisciplinary, or interdisciplinary, flavor. However, this is only an appearance. Reality is that communication studies as a whole is a dirty, mixed bag of fragmentary theories, methods, and orientations. Moreover, the very idea of a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to communication studies hollows the core of our discipline. After all, there is no discipline within our discipline.

4. Serving Dirty Businesses

Like a spider's web floating in an empty space, communication studies is suspended between some dichotomies of traditions: <administrative vs. critical>, <empirical vs. rhetorical>, and <quantitative vs. qualitative>. Generally speaking, American communication studies has been biased toward administrative, empirical, and quantitative research traditions, and American colleges and universities have been teaching communication in accordance with those traditions. It is no secret that historically ethnography has been despised, semiotics has been ignored, and cultural studies has been mocked. Only recently a few communication textbooks (especially theory books and research methods books) began to include such subjects, but they are treated at best in passing or in a superficial manner. This means that American communication studies is still trapped in the web of its own bias and myopia.

The nature of the bias can be examined by comparing communication models developed and used in Europe and America. In European semiotics, communication is well represented by Roman Jakobson's famous model (see Stam et al., 1992, pp. 15-17). His basic model has six elements: addresser (sender), addressee (receiver), message, contact (channel), context, and code. Six functions are operational in the six elements: referential, emotive, injunctive, aesthetic, phatic, and meta-theoretical. With such details, it seems fair to say that Jakobson's model is a relatively comprehensive one.

On the American side, the famous Shannon-Weaver model of communication (an engineering model, by the way) played an important role in helping communication scholars conceptualize communication phenomena (see Griffin, 1997). However, it has many different aspects, which are less useful to describe complex human communicative experiences. An element of context is missing in their model. Instead, it has an element of noise. Later, David Berlo simplified it, keeping only the elements of source, message, channel, and receiver, so it was called SMCR model. Griffin (1997) noted, "His SMCR model provided a common vocabulary and a standard way to view the communication process" (p. 23).

Before Berlo, Harold Lasswell (1948) presented a five-part process model of communication to analyze Nazi propaganda. His model was expressed as follows: *Who* says *what* through *which channel*, to *whom*, with *what effect*. This model can be found in most introductory communication textbooks in America. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984) identified this model as a transmission model, which is supposed to assume the performative function of higher educational institutions. Thus, a university policy is formed by a coherent set of answers to the following questions: "Who transmits learning? To whom? Through what medium? In what form? With what effect?" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 48). Lyotard also noted that this model was part of the postmodern condition. The postmodern condition has produced deplorable symptoms of a sickening culture. Knowingly or unknowingly, college/university administrators

and communication academicians alike have committed themselves to put this model into practice. Let us take a look at its consequences.

Lasswell's model has some serious problems. At least two elements are missing in this model. First, it did not include "In What Context," thereby neglecting historical and philosophical analyses of communicative discourse. Second, there is no feedback loop between "Who" (the speaker or the source of the message) and "Whom" (the audience). Was the omission of these elements intentional or accidental? It seems to be intentional because Lasswell was ultimately interested in the effect of propaganda. The euphemism for propaganda is "effective communication."

By virtue of "effectiveness," his model is still in use. For instance, the Pentagon *effectively* painted the Gulf War as a "clean war with stunning success." Critics attributed the clean war to a "triumph of the image" (see Mowlana, et al, 1992). But this triumph was by and large due to the Pentagon's "press pools," which were essentially a censorship mechanism, *effectively* decontextualizing the dirty war and restricting sensitive, dirty information (see Croteau & Hoynes, 2000). The point is that communication degenerates into propaganda. Propaganda is a dirty word for persuasion, which in turn is a dirty word for "effective" communication.

Preoccupation with "efficiency" is the undercurrent of Western mentality in general, manifested in progressivism, and of American mentality in particular, manifested in pragmatism. If progressivism has been a grand narrative since the European Renaissance, pragmatism puts it into practice by efficiency. In capitalist societies, efficient ways of making money are perfectly justifiable. So, anything goes in the name of efficiency. Some examples are in order. Much of the media programs, especially TV news, offer decontextualized content. MTV is a stream of images stripped of narratives as well as of contextual information. Those naked images are "floating signifiers" (in semiotic expression), which neither evoke us thinking or make thinking totally irrelevant. As Neil Postman (1985) pointed out, most ads contain misinformation or/and disinformation. Nonetheless, they mysteriously work well. The mystery is that advertising is prospering on its own failure. It is an irony. For, according to Raymond Williams (1980), "Advertising is the consequence of a social failure to find means of public information and decision over a wide range of everyday economic life" (p. 267).

The backbone of Lasswell's model can be expressed in Lee Thayer's equation as follows: A→B=X (A "communicates" something → to B with X effect). Thayer (1979) characterized this as "*the* fundamental *control* model" (p. 12; original italic). This was the principal model for communication research in America. Because communication research has been the driving force for an empiric, scientific enterprise for so long, it is apparent that the control model is deeply embedded in the American tradition of communication studies. However, Thayer argued that this dominant perspective is especially limiting of human possibilities. He said, "For one, it

would leave us too literal. The dominant paradigm (A→B=X) is suitable for command and control systems, but will not accommodate irony, spoof, plays on words, love, tragedy, or other of the more complex everyday human experiences possible" (Thayer, 1979, p. 12). This may be the cause of what Neil Postman (1993) called "symbol drain" (pp. 164-198). By the symbol drain, Postman meant the loss of serious connotations in symbols.

Thayer also pointed out that "the dominant paradigm cannot accommodate metaphor" (1979, p. 12). What happens if somebody is unable to accommodate metaphor? Symbol drain occurs. One ludicrous example can be found in George N. Gordon's case. In criticizing Marshall McLuhan's writings, Gordon (1982) wrote: "Let us remember, first, that not one bit of *sustained* and *replicated* scientific evidence, inductive or deductive, has to date justified any one of McLuhan's most famous slogans, metaphors, or dicta, whatever you wish to call them. Nor will such evidence ever be forthcoming. Nor *can* it, if scientific epistemology continues to maintain its present rigors" (p. 42; original italic). This statement simply reveals that Gordon was a victim of the dominant paradigm characterized by empiricism and scientism. Either he failed to understand McLuhan's metaphors because he was blinded by empiricism, or he refused to accept the metaphor because he was a believer of scientism. More importantly, this case reflects the general atmosphere of American academia, which has vehemently denied critical, rhetorical, and qualitative traditions. Considering that Gordon is a communication scholar, his negative remark about McLuhan's work is quite stunning.

Postman's (1993) notion of "technopoly" seems to summarize well the miserable consequences of the postmodern condition. What is technopoly? Postman wrote, "Technopoly is a form of cultural AIDS, which I here use as an acronym for Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome" (p. 63). Technopoly, then, is a name for a sick culture that is surrendered to technology, or a name of a situation where technology becomes a culture. Just as Renaissance man made God disappear into the background, so technopoly makes traditional culture disappear. It is a place where only technology is deified.

What Hans Enzensberger (1972) called "consciousness industry" (including media, educational, and political institutions) is no doubt part of technopoly. Today, the consciousness industry is driven by the number cult, which means worshipping numbers (such as amount of money and head counts of consumers, participants, voters). Only numbers seem to bring a sense of success to the consciousness industry. Mass culture has taken the lead and is immensely successful. By now, however, everybody must have noticed that mass communication is not just messy, but also dirty. For example, political communication carried out on mass media is dirty, as noted by Kathleen Hall Janieson (1992) when she addressed this issue in her book entitled *Dirty Politics*.

Douglas Kellner (1990) said that culture and advertising become almost indistinguishable. The so-called e-College (or its equivalent apparatus) seems to follow the same suit by surrendering to the number cult. Thus, education and business are becoming almost indistinguishable. With a motto of "accelerated learning" encased in the Lasswellian transmission model, many higher educational institutions are rapidly turning into diploma mills. They replace the term "transmission" by its euphemistic term "delivery" to give a façade of rhetorical discourse to commercialized education whose backbone is A→B=X. This is a word game. Such tendencies are making worse the crisis in humanities and arts to which our discipline belongs.

Today, "globalization" seems to be a catch phrase for a transition to a new century. Business communication and political communication glorify globalization. Globalization is enjoying its success on the dead body of the great debate on the New International Communication Order (NIIO). You must remember how *effectively* NIIO was transmuted into the New World International Communication Order (NWICO), and then abandoned. However, the hindsight of this success is the miserable defeat of global as well as indigeneous cultures. Globalization is capitalism's formula to bring indigenous cultures under economic order, and economic order rearranges all cultures into one unified culture. But French theologian Jacques Ellul (1990) contended that one unified culture is no culture any more.

In short, those examples paradoxically demonstrate how *successfully* things are bound to *failure* by way of communication. However, American academicians tend to keep silent on such failures. Where are communication ethics? After all, communication studies has been in the service of dirty businesses.

5. Conclusion: From the Boundaries

Ironically, communication studies turns out to be a dirty category just as we are a dirty category. There is a call to redeem communication itself and our discipline.

As Leach pointed out, power resides in dirty boundaries. We are in a position to exert positive power to the host culture, for we operate in cultural boundaries between our own traditions and American tradition. To do so, we should be able to say something from the boundaries. What can "something" be? This question requires another paper or another discussion session at the convention. You may have many ideas on this topic. Personally, I propose semiotics as the genuine foundation for communication studies. As communication studies gets its roots spread there, it can use other traditions as good fertilizers for its healthy growth. This is what I call a bottom-up approach to communication studies (see Kim, 2000).

Martin Heidegger wrote about the relationship between the world and things as follows:

> For world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate. The middle of the two is intimacy—in Latin, *inter*. The corresponding German word is *unter*, the English *inter-*. The intimacy of world and thing is not a fusion. Intimacy obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their *inter*, division prevails: a *dif-ference*. The intimacy of world and thing present in the separation of the between; it is present in the dif-ference. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 202).

From the above quotation, we can identify three notions around the Latin word *inter*: penetration, intimacy, and difference. Normatively, we may expect that these three qualities may characterize cross-cultural communicators. That is, when two different cultures meet, they don't just cross the cultural boundaries, but penetrate into each other's heart regardless of whether it is dirty or not. At the heart of the two cultures, they develop intimacy. Yet they remain distinct and different from each other, respecting each other's differences. Then, cross-cultural communication naturally evolves into inter-cultural communication.

In dealing with the communication discipline as a dirty category, we should redefine our own category. This is the first step to overcome the dirty categories. With the spirit of intimacy, we should find ways to make positive contributions to communication studies in America.

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